



Texans Advocating for Meaningful Student Assessment

AUSTIN, TX

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Members of TAMSA, a grassroots organization of parents and business owners who support public schools and demand high educational standards, take issue with a recent press release and letter to Texas House Members regarding the House Education Committee June 19<sup>th</sup> hearing on the Texas STAAR accountability program.

This letter, as quoted in the *Austin American Statesman*, asserts that the groundswell of concern expressed at the hearing was "nothing more than rhetorical warfare, full of flare but devoid of facts." To the contrary, the testimony from parents, students, teachers, superintendents, and university professors overwhelming supported the view—backed by firm evidence and real-life examples—that the State's new testing system is critically flawed.

There are thousands of Texas parents who believe the results of STAAR End of Course Exams (EOCs) released by TEA on June 8, 2012 raise serious questions about the EOC tests. We do not believe that children in Texas have suddenly dropped learning levels by 40-60 percent in one year. Rather, we question whether the EOCs are in fact effective measures of student learning and progress, and whether the tremendous time and expense associated with the testing (not only the amount paid to the test-maker but also the District-incurred costs of assessment and remediation and the significant diversion of classroom instructional time to test preparation) warrant this new assessment system.

As parents and taxpayers, we are entitled to an accountability system that works to improve student learning and generates meaningful outcomes.

Dr. Walter Stroup, Associate Professor in STEM Education at UT Austin, NSF CAREER Award recipient, and member of the original Executive Steering Committee that developed the nationally recognized UTeach Natural Science teacher certification program, expressed surprise that the critiques of STAAR were viewed as an attack on school accountability.

Having observed the hearing testimony, and himself presenting, Dr. Stroup commented "Of the dozens of presentations made, over more than seven hours of testimony, all but a very few expressed explicit support for accountability as a tool for improving schools. The evidence presented during the hearing suggested that, at the very least, the STAAR tests do not deserve the free pass some seem far too willing to give them. The facts that should matter would be those that speak directly to the issue at hand: Are Texans likely to get the kind and quality of information from STAAR they need to drive meaningful accountability?"

The letter and press release, from the Texas Association of Business, overlooked the testimony of Superintendents, educators, parents, and students that included:

- Concern that the STAAR high test failure rate would seriously escalate the drop-out rate, particularly among at-risk students. Amarillo ISD superintendent Rod Schroder testified that a large majority — approximately 70 percent — of students failing the first administration of the STAAR end-of-course exams this year were students already identified as academically at risk. These students are now off track for graduation.
- Concern that test content secrecy impacts instruction: without the test questions (which are not being released), schools are limited in their ability to provide meaningful remediation because they cannot know the questions that the students answered incorrectly
- Questions about the timing of the EOC tests as they relate to student advancement
- Concerns about the cost of remediation to districts and students
- The social/emotional impact of high stakes testing on students
- Whether the STAAR EOC system is the most efficient way to test college and career readiness

Dr. Stroup noted, "When it comes to facts, Mr. Hammond would seem to have missed the facts that mattered most at the hearing."

To Dr. Carolyn Heinrich, a professor at the UT LBJ School of Public Affairs and a member of the National Academies of Science committee that reviewed America's test-based accountability system, the current STAAR EOC system is seriously flawed. The NAS researchers spent nearly a decade reviewing the evidence as it accumulated. She explains that the Committee concluded, "There are little to no positive effects of these systems overall on student learning and educational progress, and there is a widespread teaching to the test and gaming of the system that reflects a wasteful use of resources and that leads to inaccurate or inflated measures of performance."

In sum, TAB's suggestion that those who criticize or oppose the STAAR tests are trying to dismantle accountability is absolutely wrong and is simply fear-mongering. The reference to "moral bankruptcy" is offensive to those of us who support and demand a quality public education for ALL children. Opposition to STAAR does not equate with opposition to accountability. TAMSA agrees with the House Committee Chair, Representative Rob Eissler, who made it clear he felt more hearings were warranted.

Dr. Stroup concluded, "Next time, Mr. Hammond might want to skip his own misguided version of 'rhetorical warfare' related to accountability in general, and instead stick to facts about STAAR's ability to provide the kind of information we need for accountability to work." And with nearly a half-billion dollar price tag and the impact STAAR is having on all levels of schooling, "It would help, too, if next time he came ready to explain, not just assert, that STAAR is 'cost effective.'" Dr. Heinrich adds, "Contrary to statements Mr. Hammond has made in the past in the *Austin-American Statesman*, there is no body of evidence that causally links high-stakes testing to improvements in student learning; alternatively, there is mounting empirical evidence of its negative impacts on student advancement and learning."

In the months ahead, TAMSA will continue to provide meaningful information and evidence to help the legislature make positive changes to the Texas testing and accountability system for the betterment of all children.

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TAMSA is a statewide grass roots group of parents, community leaders, and business people who recognize the challenges imposed by the STAAR EOC assessment system and who will work with the legislature and interested stakeholders to effectuate positive change.

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